



DESTITUENT ECOLOGY

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WHAT'S LEFT?

We have become used to a certain version of eco-melancholia.[2] We are saturated by it. Our lost objects are endless. There are the vanishing forests, the starving polar bears, and the daily horrors of the meat industry. There is the rapid melting of the polar ice caps, ocean acidification; a staggering reduction in biodiversity; insect die-off, not to mention the infinity of plastic build-up that is choking what's left. Even our clearest hope for a better future, renewable energy, comes at a cost.[3] Meanwhile, environmental racism continues apace in Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities, and oil companies like Exxon Mobil continue to rake in profits.[4]

It doesn't end there. Mega fires are becoming more frequent and far deadlier. COVID-19 has spread to all corners of the earth. To say that the virus kills is, of course, true; COVID-19 has devastated whole populations (again, mostly Black, Brown, and poor) the world over. But the greater truth is that nothing is more viral than this vampire economy we live by, which lives on our broken flesh.

Of course, these events are all tied to climate peril. The planet's devastation disrupts and dislocates complex ecosystems, increasing the likelihood that what seems catastrophic now will be an ordinary day in the not-so-distant future.

Between those who profit from disaster and those who suffer from it, there stands another major threat to life: the police. Anti-Black terrorism and the armies of militarized police are the first lines of defense in maintaining—not our safety but—

private property, white supremacy, and bipartisan neoliberalism. Adding insult to injury, the police are organized. Their budgets are fat in the order of several billions of dollars. Meanwhile, our schools, our commons, and our bodies rot from austerity.

Eco-melancholia: it isn't an aberrant condition; it is, rather, the general psychosomatic condition of being alive today and conscious of the growing destitution of the planet. Some of us (white, cisgender, affluent) may be able to pretend it isn't happening—for a while, anyway. But the global destitution is coming; the end of the world is already here. It's been here.[5]

Faced with this generalized loss, left academics have turned to deconstructed particulars, endless mourning, and a politics of spectrality at the expense of universalist communist struggle. Though I am sympathetic to spectral politics and am not immune to the deconstructive argument, with Wendy Brown and Jodi Dean,[6] I am left to wonder how hauntology leads to emancipatory struggle: how to collectivize loss? Because, indeed, each loss is singular and unequivocal, as left melancholy attests, but the *libidinal* connection to loss is universal. Loss, as Freud and Lacan both argue, *drives* eros.

The following essay sketches—briefly, in broad strokes—a specifically psychoanalytic approach to environmental politics. I call this politico-philosophical configuration, *destituent ecology*, a form of self-destitution pertaining to the subject's libidinal attachment to loss. Freud calls this libidinal attachment the death drive. Lacan calls it the nonrelation. In both cases, destitution involves a relation to the outside—to what transcends the network of objects and relations. I theorize the nonrelation in opposition to the reigning theories of ecological entanglement and do so by foregrounding psychoanalysis in the critique of extractive capitalism.

In his essay "Negation," Freud speculates that "the antithesis between subjective and objective does not exist from the first"[7]; the infant exists in a world of autoeroticism without division. The subject-object antithesis must therefore be *produced*. Through weaning, the infant not only separates from its caretaker but also learns to "*refind*" its objects, including its most precious object, the ego, against a backdrop of loss.[8] The presence and absence of the breast, the incomplete demands of the Other, all memorably captured by Freud in his recollection of his grandson, who uses the signifiers "fort" (gone) and "da" (there) to make sense of the gaps and vivisections in his newly divided world, slowly constitute the subject as a *subject of loss*.

Lacan's *Anxiety* seminar furthers Freud's argument by adding a surprise twist. It is not just that the subject emerges against a background of loss. According to Lacan, the subject, to *become* a subject, sacrifices or cedes parts of its body to the Other. Like a lizard, salamander, starfish, or lobster, the infant destitutes (abandons, destroys) parts of itself in order to escape the perilous demands of the Other. These ceded objects become the libidinized objects of the child's (and later the adult's) world. Desire is, in this Lacanian sense, an empty circuit. Although desire opens up to the world, it does not open out to the world. On the contrary, the orifices of the bodily drives take in the world only to empty it (to destitute it).

By ceding the lost object to the Other, the subject is free to fantasize about that loss. Through the loss of this special object, the *objet a*, the subject becomes a desiring subject for the first time. It gains a foothold on desire outside the Other and a minimal consistency through fantasy. It maintains this minimal consistency by repeating the loss, the foundational act of cession, that inaugurated desire in

the first place. The child plays at throwing their object away, but not to get it back. On the contrary, the child throws the object away to maintain the distance required to maintain the fantasy of retrieval. What is retrieved, ultimately, isn't the thing, but the fragment of the Thing, miniaturized as little object *a*, which is both integral to the subject and grotesque, a reminder of their own (and the Other's) incognizable jouissance. It is to escape "the thing in me more than me" that I throw a piece of myself away. Desire is born from the discard.

The difficulty of Lacan's lesson is that the lost or ceded objects only exist retroactively *as lost*. The lost object is, therefore, the object par excellence of *Nachträglichkeit*, or retroaction. The lost object has no substance before being lost, which is why the substance of the libido is essentially mutational, monstrous, shapeshifting, and alien because it is informed by a formless nothing. Hence, any effort to "*refind*" the lost object is ultimately impossible. The subject of desire can only repeat the loss or sacrifice—the first act of cession—that instituted desire in the first place. Simply put, I lose my desired objects so that I can pursue them; the most coveted objects are thus the ones that incarnate and sustain loss (for example, a lover's inscrutable gaze, an art object that has a certain *je ne sais quoi*). Destitution is always split: we institute objects of desire (the new job, the new car, the new fantasy *x*) so that we can lose them (again).

Anxiety emerges primordially when desire has no exit—that is, *not* when the object is missing (as Freud thought), but when the object is too *present*.[9] Lacan writes: "Anxiety isn't about the loss of the object, but its presence. The objects aren't missing."[10] The foundational act of desire, according to Lacan, is sacrifice. The subject destroys/cedes parts of itself (parts that will later become the phantom objects of desire—the breast, voice, feces, gaze, and so on) in the very act of becoming a subject of desire. We are, in this sense, the direct result of the disjecta membra we abandon or flee. Paradoxically, we, desiring subjects, escape

(into) ourselves. Lacan compares this repetitive process of detachment (repetitive because the act of self-sacrifice happens not once but for all time; anytime, for example, we fantasize about the lost object, we lose that object again) to an act of cession:

> In the main, it's not true that the child is weaned. He weans *himself*. He detaches himself from the breast, he plays. After the first experience of cession, … he plays at detaching himself from the breast and taking it up again. If there weren't already present something active enough for us to be able to articulate it in the sense of a desire for weaning, how could we even conceive of the very primitive facts, which are quite primordial in their appearance, of the refusal of the breast, the first forms of anorexia whose correlations at the level of the Other our experience teaches us to seek out right away?[11]

What is remarkable about Lacan's theory is that it interweaves two seemingly contradictory processes: loss, on the one hand, and refusal, on the other. The first form of freedom, Lacan argues, is anorexia, or the desire for an empty mouth. "[The child] weans *himself*," that is, destitutes himself—the breast, feces, voice, and gaze all being part of the child's originally enveloped world—so that desire can break free.

This act of self-division may sound like a close version of ecological entanglement—particularly Karen Barad's influential formula, "relata do not preexist relations."[12] This idea holds that there are no given entities but rather intra-active agencies. "Agential realism" (Barad's term) refers to quantum entanglement; it is nearly impossible to imagine because, in it, there is quite literally no-thing, no stable entity or object. The subject-object poles of existence only come into being through what Barad calls "agential cuts." Whereas Lacan says that only language cuts and gives shape to reality, Barad argues that matter is already self-cutting: in

other words, material reality cuts into itself, self-organizes, and creates boundaries within matter. Matter, or nature, does not require an agential cut from the outside, i.e., language or the signifier. Barad claims that nature is both primary process and secondary process at once. Because matter is agential, it is both the product and the agent of cutting, and therefore the apparatuses of cutting are infinite. What Lacan calls symptom, the intrusion of the Real into the symbolic order, Barad calls intra-action, the intrusion of all things into everything else.

Lacan does flirt with ecological metaphors, including insect anatomy and viviparous births, to underscore the divisions that constitute the split subject of the unconscious. But ecological entanglement, his theory is not. For what the ecological soup of interrelated parts cannot think, or tolerate for that matter, is an agency that *loses itself into being*. The ecological formula, *relations precede the relata*, psychoanalytically revised would be, *nonrelations precede the relata*. To be sure, there are relations, relations upon relations that are biological, chemical, affective, and so on. But for there to be a subject in the strict sense, a desiring subject, something must fall out. The nonrelation is, in psychoanalysis, the uncountable remainder that ecotheory tries but fails to quilt together through metaphors of entanglement. This quilting is impossible because the lost object of desire never really existed to begin with. It was never part of an ecological network; the lost object of desire *incurves* that network.

The lost or ceded object has no substance and, therefore, no possible ontological relation before being lost. It only comes into being in and through loss, retroactively through the fantasy of its obtainment. This residue of loss ecocriticism cannot tolerate. It cannot tolerate the nonobject or nothing-object that psychoanalysis makes primary to relationality as such since to do so would be to admit an obtrusive outside *in* the quilt-work of our ecological relations.[13] The Lacanian perspective is not that these biological, chemical,

geological, atmospheric, and technological relations do not exist; their existence is plain to see. The psychoanalytic point is that these relations quilt an unknowable remainder. All of life would have to be construed as a symptom of the uncountable remainder that Lacan calls lack. Though lack has a bad reputation—indeed, all of life and the quilt-work of our ecological relations tries to cover over the lack of a generalized castration—from another angle, lack is wildly fecund. To cede is, after all, the flip side of seeding. Loss, psychoanalytically speaking, seeds an unknowable future. This, perhaps, is why Lacan calls the unconscious the "*unborn*,"[14] because, through the repetition of lack, life continues to generate itself contradictorily as *negative life*.

LEFT EROS

Left melancholy has hitherto only theorized the lost attachment; it has yet to theorize the object of destitution, which the psychoanalytic subject willingly abandons in order to *enjoy* a spacious (and specious) loss. We can imagine the consequence of focusing only on the first half of this loss. The result is a game show style of politics, in which everyone gets their own lost object: "You get a specter! And you get a specter!"[15] But if we are to imagine collective, emancipatory struggle, we will need to go beyond left melancholy with its endless, atomized particulars. We'll need to theorize left eros.

Unlike left melancholy, which waxes on about an impossible transcendental object and so oddly enough continues to pay homage to the signifier of lost plentitude (Lacan calls this way of enjoyment phallic jouissance and attributes it to the masculine position in his theory of sexuation), left eros (which we could align with the feminine position, keeping in mind that these terms "feminine" and "masculine" are purely symbolic coordinates) accepts its castration and the

destitution of the phallus as the true driving force of libidinal politics, *all* politics, left and right.[16]

The Right knows this. While the Left has been busy with hauntology, the Right has had a monopoly on libidinal politics, which reached its zenith (or nadir) in the Trump presidency. To be adherent to Trump and all that the Right symbolizes (including white supremacy, eco-apartheid, and capitalist annihilation) is to be libidinally cathected to the sacrificial, self-destructive politics of Trump's rhetoric. That enjoyment is not incidental to the inconsistencies in Trump's speech (his contradictions, falsities, and incoherence). Nor is it incidental to his sadism. While liberals point to the inconsistencies in Trump's speech, to his buffoonery and ineptitude, they miss the enjoyment that Trump inspires in his followers. Their enjoyment is directly wired to Trump's nonsense—to the lack he symbolizes and quite clearly enjoys.

Contrast Trump's rhetoric to the sterile discourse of liberals and most leftists, and we begin to see a problem. The problem was recently diagnosed in the fourth installment of *The Matrix* series, *Resurrections*, when the Analyst figure scoffs at the importance of facts: "[The old] Matrix was all fussy facts and equations," the Analyst derides. "But [people] don't give a shit about facts," he says. "It's all about fiction."[17] The Analyst is the film's figure of right-wing authority, but he makes a good point. The Left has had a monopoly on facts, but it has little to say about the fictions that trigger our enjoyment.

Consider an example: in their conclusion to *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal*, co-authors Kate Aronoff, Alyssa Battistoni, Daniel Cohen, and Thea Riofrancos invite readers to envision "a possible near-future." That future includes "workers around the country … planting trees in degraded forests," "intercity travel that's carbon-free," "tuition-free college," and "guaranteed jobs"

that “pay a good wage for a four-day week.”[18] Key here is that the authors stress enjoyment. The future they hold out for is one in which we get to enjoy life without the barriers that capitalism imposes. They warn: “carbon-free, communal luxuries that a radical Green New Deal promises” are not all “just around the corner.” Nevertheless, they maintain, “We should keep these visions of a possible near-future in mind as we tackle the devilish details of decarbonizing.”[19] Aronoff and co-writers argue that the fight for decarbonization should be “all-out”; there’s no time to lose.[20] This is especially true of climate strike. In their outline of a Green New Deal, they “call for 100 percent all-out strike: shutting down business as usual to make a new order possible.”[21] The problem, as I see it, is that this strategy for the future considers enjoyment as the endpoint, after the strike and after the obstacles have been surmounted. But this misses the enjoyment that the drive already obtains in the present through loss. As Todd McGowan argues, the problem isn’t that capitalism blocks our enjoyment, erecting barriers where there would otherwise be free-flowing desire; the problem is that we enjoy the barriers.[22]

Aronoff and co. are hyperaware of loss, so much so that their visions of loss nearly outnumber their visions of success: “There will be setbacks,” they write; “The more serious a climate program we have, the more opposition it will face”; “Political change is uneven and multifaceted.”[23] These caveats spread throughout *A Planet to Win* and, at least on the surface, signify the authors’ pragmatism.

Nevertheless, the repetition of loss in their book suggests that there is more than mere pragmatism at stake in their rhetoric. Read psychoanalytically, the losses that interrupt their progressive narrative are, in fact, central, not peripheral, to the enjoyment they incur in writing and imagining climate activism. I am suggesting that Aronoff and her co-authors underestimate the value of loss both in their own writing and in motivating large-scale decarbonization. From this vantage, the

rhetoric of left environmentalism should not be "A Planet to Win" but "A Planet to Lose." If we take the death drive seriously, as thinkers like Lee Edelman and Alenka Zupančič do,[24] then an ecological politics based on winning can never truly succeed since winning conceals the traumatic structure that brings people to the streets.

I am not suggesting that the future imagined by the authors of *A Planet to Win* is in any way naive. Nor am I arguing that we should not be concerned with practical matters, only the pure negativity of the drive. Death drive does not have to be an edgelord discourse.[25] Instead, I am trying to tap the creativity and superfluity of the drive for a truly "all-out" strike.

Consider a final example: in her COP26 speech, delivered to a mass rally of climate protestors, Greta Thunberg did her usual routine: she quoted the facts about carbon emissions, excoriated governmental officials, and urged her audience to listen to the scientists. Despite the usual rhetoric (listen to the scientists!), one intriguing speech act broke through. Thunberg said to her audience: "No more blah blah blah."[26] This speech act, which privileges the jouissance of the signifier, its sheer sonic repetition over meaning, was soon repeated, memed, and hashtagged and became part of the strike's verbal arsenal. At its core, however, "No more blah blah blah" is rhetorically powerful because it taps the nonsensical, meaningless, and afutural Real of the signifier that Lacan, in his reading of James Joyce, claims drives Joyce's literary inventiveness.[27] Not a mere negation of the future, then, the death drive motivates Joyce's creativity, forging new linguistic pathways and bonds that previously did not exist. This, to my mind, is a pretty good example of what left politics can do: forge coalitions, creating surplus *from* lack. To be clear, I am not saying that Thunberg is the Joyce of the environmental Left. I am saying, however, that Thunberg, in her speech,

unintentionally touched on the sacrificial energy of the drive, a drive that has no future and no fight to win but is crucial to going *all out*.

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2. On eco-melancholia and its entwinement with queer theory, see Jean-Thomas Tremblay and Steven Swarbrick, "Destructive Environmentalism: The Queer Impossibility of *First Reformed*," *Discourse* 43, no. 1 (2021): 3-30. ↩
3. Jasper Bernes, "Between the Devil and the Green New Deal," *Commune*, April 25, 2019, https://communemag.com/between-the-devil-and-the-green-new-deal/; Christopher Ketcham, "Addressing Climate Change Will Not 'Save the Planet,'" *The Intercept*, December 3, 2022, https://theintercept.com/2022/12/03/climate-biodiversity-green-energy/. ↩
4. Evan Halper, "Shell Adds to Oil Industry's Record Profits," *The Washington Post*, January 31, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/01/31/oil-profits-chevron-exxonmobil-earnings/. ↩
5. Of particular interest here are the arguments of Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III. Hartman theorizes Black life after the end of the world in "The End of White Supremacy, An American Romance," *Bomb* 152, June 5, 2020, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/the-end-of-white-supremacy-an-american-romance/; Wilderson theorizes Blackness *as* the end of the world in *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright, 2020). ↩
6. This "with" is of course tenuous. Although Brown and Dean both begin with Walter Benjamin's essay, "Left-Wing Melancholy," their theories of left

melancholy differ dramatically. For Dean, the Left suffers not because it is "attached to its own failure" (157), as per Brown's argument, but because it has "given way on the desire for communism" and "so now satisfies itself with criticism and interpretation, small projects and local actions, particular issues and legislative victories," etc. "This Left remains stuck in repetition, unable to break out of the circuits of drive in which it is caught, unable because it enjoys them" (174-175). See Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," *boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (1999): 19-27; and Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (New York: Verso, 2012). ↩

7. Sigmund Freud, "Negation" (1925), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 19, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 237. ↩
8. Freud, "Negation," 237. ↩
9. Frédéric Neyrat theorizes this lack of exit, in which life becomes claustrophobic and, hence, anxiogenic, as "saturated immanence." See Neyrat, *Atopias: Manifesto for a Radical Existentialism*, trans. Walt Hunter and Lindsay Turner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 4. ↩
10. Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A.R. Price (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014), 54. ↩
11. Lacan, *Anxiety*, 327-328. ↩
12. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 140. ↩
13. I develop this point elsewhere. See Steven Swarbrick, *The Environmental Unconscious: Ecological Poetics from Spenser to Milton* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023), 3, 9-17, 235-236; and Steven Swarbrick, "The Weather in Sedgwick," *Critical Inquiry* 49, no. 2 (2023): 165-184. ↩

taken from alienocene

1. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Allain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998), 23. ↩
2. Joan Copjec levels this humorous critique in “Sexual Difference,” *Political Concepts*, November 3, 2014, https://www.politicalconcepts.org/sexual-difference-joan-copjec/. ↩
3. See Todd McGowan, *Enjoyment Right & Left* (Portland, OR: Sublation Press, 2022), 10. ↩
4. *The Matrix: Resurrections*, dir. Lana Wachowski (2021; Warner Bros. Pictures, Village Roadshow Pictures, Venus Castina Productions). ↩
5. Kate Aronoff, Alyssa Battistoni, Daniel Aldana Cohen, and Thea Riofrancos, *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal* (New York: Verso, 2019), 171-172. ↩
6. Aronoff et al., *A Planet to Win*, 172. ↩
7. Ibid., 175. ↩
8. Ibid., 175. ↩
9. Todd McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 11; see also 36-41. ↩
10. Aronoff et al., *A Planet to Win*, 176. ↩
11. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Alenka Zupančič, *What Is Sex?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017). ↩
12. Zupančič calls the death drive a “construction site” in *What Is Sex?* (94). ↩
13. Greta Thunberg, “COP26 is a failure,” November 5, 2021, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHLVDlb6rCU. ↩
14. Jacques Lacan, *The Sinthome: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXIII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A.R. Price (Medford, MA: Polity Press,

2016). ↩

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